



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Socio-Cultural Aspects of Migration and Integration

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Human Dimension Seminar, Warsaw
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Thank you, Mr. Moderator.

The United States would like to thank ODIHR for organizing this successful and informative seminar, as well as all the participants here for sharing their ideas and best practices. We also very much thank the Slovenian Chairmanship for making migration and integration a priority this year at the OSCE.

Over the past three years I have repeated many times, in many different fora, my conviction that migration and integration is perhaps the most important issue facing OSCE participating States in the 21st century. The discussions here over the past three days have shown how true that is.

I am glad that the OSCE has taken this crucial first step towards helping participating States recognize and meet the challenges of migration, and especially integration of legal immigrants into public life and into their host societies.

When I heard that we would have this forum, I knew that I absolutely had to be here. However, I am disappointed that more OSCE Ambassadors have not come from Vienna to listen and learn from the discussions on this critical topic. Perhaps this was due to lack of funds, which in some cases is understandable. But here we have such a vital issue being discussed without the presence of the ambassadors who will be deciding on OSCE's work in this area.

The United States is a nation of immigrants, where people from many different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, religions or beliefs, and national origins have developed a common national identity because of their shared commitments to the principles of liberty, of opportunity, and of equality before the law.

I am one of those, having myself immigrated to the U.S. from then war-torn Germany over 55 years ago, when I was a young boy, eleven years old, for whom my parents saw a better future. I sometimes wonder what would have been had we stayed, considering the wonderful way Europe has evolved since December 1949. But America gave me the opportunities my parents sought, more for me than for themselves – for them it was hard. This culminated in President Bush's nomination of me as the Ambassador to the OSCE in 2001. America was then and is today truly the land of opportunity, and my presence here today is one of millions of examples that America values its migrants, even by nominating them to some of the most important appointed positions in the government.

Over the past centuries and to this day, immigrants who came to our shores in search of a new life have become African-American, Asian-American, German-American, Irish-American, Polish-American, and Mexican-American, and that is to name only a few.

They and their children and grandchildren have become part of the wonderfully varied tapestry that is American society, sharing the fabric of our common values, but without losing their distinct cultural heritages.

Integration in the U.S. is an on-going process; it is something we are working on every day. Still, despite its diversity, the United States has faced its share of challenges integrating different ethnic groups.

We anticipate that other OSCE states – especially those that are more homogeneous and that have had less experience with migration and integration over the course of their histories than we have had – will also face challenges as they open their borders. New flows of migrants mean that these states may confront new forms of ethnic, racial, and religious diversity, in some cases for the first time, and on a large scale.

Immigration can be seen as a great opportunity or as a problem. Too often, in too many places, it has been viewed as the latter. But I believe that is changing and that immigration is now viewed increasingly as an opportunity. A wealth of data and studies shows that immigration contributes to job creation and economic growth. I recommend a study with these findings from this morning's Financial Times. Yet domestic populations in many countries, including in OSCE states, sometimes tend mistakenly to view immigrants as a burden on the job market and social services.

We need to find a way to overcome this perception and to help communities help migrants to integrate, for the benefit of everyone concerned.

The United States has seen immigration as an opportunity, and America's great strength is based on that. That is why the United States continues to welcome new immigrants from various regions of the world. We use every institution available to integrate legal immigrants into our economy, polity, and social structures.

For example, President Bush has proposed a Temporary Worker Program to match willing foreign workers with willing U.S. employers when no Americans can be found to fill the jobs. Congress is now considering this proposal.

The program would be open to new foreign workers, and to the undocumented men and women currently employed in the U.S., and would thus allow workers who currently hold jobs to come out of hiding and participate legally in America's economy and society, while discouraging further illegal migration.

The United States also has other avenues of legal immigration, such as to reunite families, help fill employment gaps, promote diversity, and provide safe homes for refugees. Opening avenues for legal immigration helps ensure that immigrants will have the necessary social structures in place to facilitate their integration.

By virtue of language or cultural differences, migrants are often particularly vulnerable to human rights violations. Governments should take steps to ensure that children of migrants

are able to attend school, as I was able to after I immigrated; that migrants enjoy safe conditions in the workplace and their places of residence; and that emergency health care is available. They should also encourage NGOs to help orient and integrate legal migrants into their new communities, as they did in my own case, where an NGO played a critical role in teaching me English and placing me with an American family so that I could integrate into the community. Schools should teach about the benefits of migration and diversity.

Finally, the need to truly integrate immigrants into our societies is today more important than ever. If migrants are left to feel that they are permanently excluded from participation in the economy, society, and government of their host countries, the consequences for all of us will be disastrous.

At best, these migrants will give up and return home, leaving unfilled jobs in the host country and ending very important remittances that their families relied on in the country of origin.

At worst, they will remain in the host country, feeling isolated, feeling angry, feeling excluded, and possibly turning to socially unproductive or counterproductive conduct, such as crime or violence as an outlet for their frustration. Too many times in the past years, we have seen hostility between migrant groups and more established minorities breed racist, anti-Semitic, and other hate crimes in the OSCE region.

Other times, the frustrations of isolated migrants turn against the government of the state in which they live, sometimes even through terrorism. This is obviously absolutely deplorable, but it is preventable if governments and communities reach out and make an effort to integrate legal migrants.

We have heard many productive recommendations during this seminar. I encourage all participants to make use of these best practices, and of the assistance that ODIHR can provide. I also encourage OSCE participating States to invite the three Personal Representatives for tolerance, who have been with us here for the past three days, to visit their countries and share their ideas on best practices for integrating legal migrants from different ethnic groups.

Only a concerted effort of all interested parties – governments, international organizations, civil society, and migrants themselves – will ensure that, as can be the case, international migration is beneficial to countries of origin, countries of destination, migrants themselves, and the people they come into contact with.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and once again I commend the Slovenian Chairmanship for choosing migration and integration as the subject of this seminar.